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Tour Iowa's newest top-security data center

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(Photo: Bryon Houlgrave/The Register)

The biggest difference between Altoona's newest data center and its biggest data center is pretty simple.

"If you were to show up on Facebook's doorstep and say I want to put (my company's information) in your data center — they don't do that," said Jeffrey Springborn, LightEdge Solutions' chief operating officer. "We do that. They're two completely different models."

Just off of Interstate Highway 80, the hum of Facebook's mammoth data warehouses keep user photos, videos and posts alive on the social media juggernaut's platform. About three miles to the east, LightEdge will open a markedly smaller data center. But it will serve hundreds of clients, storing the data of multiple health care organizations, banks and manufacturers.

To put it another way: think of the way most consumers would go about swapping out a car engine in need of replacement.

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"You're not going to buy all the tools, you're not going to buy the diagnostics. You're not going to buy everything you need to change that engine," Springborn says. "You're going to take it somewhere where they have all those tools. Well, that's essentially what we're doing today. They're coming to facilities like this."

Photos: Gov. Reynolds gets look at Altoona data center

LightEdge showed off its new \$25 million space this week to local students and public officials, including Gov. Kim Reynolds. The windowless, 70,000-square-foot building will officially open Thursday. Clients will move in servers and computer equipment shortly thereafter.

In April 2016, the Iowa Economic Development Authority awarded LightEdge \$375,000 in sales, service and use tax refunds for building the new data center.

The project is LightEdge's second data center in Iowa: Its original one is right next door in Altoona, but has reached capacity, officials said. The company also operates an underground data center below Worlds of Fun in Kansas City, Mo. And it recently purchased a [16,925-square-foot data center](https://www.lightedge.com/lightedge-solutions-acquires-cabelas-omaha-data-center/) (<https://www.lightedge.com/lightedge-solutions-acquires-cabelas-omaha-data-center/>) from Cabela's in Omaha.



Jeffrey Springborn, COO of LightEdge Solutions, discusses the security levels at the data center on Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017, in Altoona. (Photo: Bryon Houlgrave/The Register)

Over the last decade, Facebook, Google and Microsoft have built massive data centers in Iowa, thanks to its cheap power, relatively low risk of natural disaster and access to renewable wind energy. Apple in August announced it would build a \$1.4 billion data center ([/story/money/business/2017/08/24/iowa-incentives-waukee-apple-data-center/596822001/](http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/money/business/2017/08/24/iowa-incentives-waukee-apple-data-center/596822001/)) in Waukee.

While those projects have recruited some of technology's biggest names to Iowa, smaller data firms like LightEdge have argued that their companies are more ingrained (<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/money/business/2017/08/24/iowa-incentives-waukee-apple-data-center/596822001/>) in the local economy, because they do business with local companies.

"The large data centers likely are not interacting and providing the same type of value with the tech community and organizations they serve as some of the other providers in the region," Joe Shields, president and co-founder of IP Pathways, another local tech firm offering data center services, told the Des Moines Register (<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/money/business/2017/08/24/iowa-incentives-waukee-apple-data-center/596822001/>) in August.

While the governor cheered on Iowa's recruitment of Apple outside the Statehouse, she exhibited equal enthusiasm over LightEdge's expansion in Altoona.



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"I think you saw it when I walked in the door," Reynolds said. "I mean, it's pretty impressive when you walk in here. Who wouldn't want to work here?"

She said Iowa should welcome both small data centers and the behemoths built by tech giants. But she said local firms like LightEdge are more connected with other Iowa businesses.

"It definitely is," she said. "Seventy percent of their business is local companies right here. It's a great asset for us."

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Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, center, acting Lt. Gov. Adam Gregg, second from left, tour the LightEdge Solutions data center on Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017, in Altoona. (Photo: Bryon Houlgrave/The Register)

The facility is modeled after its underground sister site in Kansas City's Subtropolis Technology Center.

Dark walls and floors are covered in varying shades of gray. Engineers work in a small room that serves as a mission control of sorts. Large monitors track energy usage, heating and cooling systems. One screen is dominated by a giant world map that broadcasts attempted cyber attacks in real time.

When fully built out, the facility will feature about 40,000 square feet of raised floors. Massive cooling systems funnel air below the server rooms. One room is dedicated to the power system, which operates about 2.4 megawatts of electricity. That's similar to the electrical capacity of new [2.5-megawatt wind turbines](http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/tech/science/environment/2017/04/22/wind-blown-midamerican-zeroes-100-renewable-energy/100581038/) ([/story/tech/science/environment/2017/04/22/wind-blown-midamerican-zeroes-100-renewable-energy/100581038/](http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/tech/science/environment/2017/04/22/wind-blown-midamerican-zeroes-100-renewable-energy/100581038/)) Iowa utilities are quickly building across rural Iowa.

Each server room includes battery backups. Outside, two 3,500-gallon generators are prepared to take over in the event of a prolonged outage.

At the data center, outsiders can't enter without being buzzed in by staff. Once inside, individual areas are protected with biometric security measures, including facial recognition screening and palm readings.



LightEdge employs about 110 people in Iowa, with plans to hire 20 more. For comparison, Apple said its initial 400,000 square feet of data center space would require about 50 employees.

The company serves many of the state's best known firms, including Brownells and Wellmark Blue Cross Blue Shield.

Companies like LightEdge essentially serve as landlords, providing the security, power and cooling needed to run a modern data center. Springborn says a growing number of Iowa companies are giving up their own in-house data centers in favor of shared spaces.

"They don't want to manage facilities like this. They don't want to manage equipment," he said. "That's our job."

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